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No Ripcord's Quarterly Music & Arts Journal



LINDA PERHACS

on her remarkable return

VINYL SHOPPING A LOVE AFFAIR WITH CHART POP CASSETTE CULTURE
THE SUPERHERO GENRE THE INTERNET AND WORLD MUSIC

A Word From the Editor

The roots of NR⁺ can be traced back to a pretentious rebranding exercise over ten years ago.

In 2002, during my second year at university, No Ripcord – the tiny and ever so slightly obnoxious web-based fanzine, which had begun life as a vehicle to obtain promotional materials – metamorphosed into a living, breathing ‘Independent Music and Film Magazine’.

The new title was no doubt fuelled by a desire to be taken more seriously, which sounds pretty desperate in retrospect, but it did herald an increase in productivity and professionalism. There was a shift in tone on the website and you could argue that it signified the beginning of a new aspirational era for No Ripcord.

One of my grand ideas at the time was a physical magazine version of No Ripcord. Indeed, an early attempt exists on a dusty hard drive in my attic, the members of Black Dice its unlikely cover stars. I think I got as far as the contents page before moving onto my next bright idea.

With a skeleton staff and no funding to speak of, it was no surprise that our first attempt at a physical magazine ended in failure. Twelve years on, however, the landscape has changed.

Just as the growing popularity of the world wide web provided the fledgling No Ripcord a platform on which to prosper, the emergence of tablet devices and eReaders has encouraged us to publish this journal.

A digital format affords us the artistic possibilities of a print magazine without any of the associated overheads. You can download it to the device of your choice and read it at your leisure, without the

need for an internet connection. You can even print it out if you so wish.

The format also allows us to present a defined set of articles, rather than simply adding to the massive archive already present on www.noripcord.com. Think of it as a lovingly curated mixtape rather than a never-ending playlist of unrelated material.

One final and crucial point – this is not intended as a replacement for the No Ripcord website. That remains our primary focus for reviews and feature coverage. This is simply an added bonus, one we hope you will enjoy very much.

David Coleman
April 2014



*“Think of it as a lovingly
curated mixtape”*

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A special thank you to Lauren Dukoff for her stunning portraits of Linda Perhacs, which we have reproduced on the cover and on page eleven.

Thanks also to Jonas Staf for allowing us to include the photograph of his store on page nine.

Pressing “Rewind” in an Era of Technological “Fast Forward”

DIY Cassette Culture Finds Relevance in the Shadows of Digital Media

By Sean Caldwell

“Home taping is killing record industry profits! We left this side blank so you can help.”

Cassette versions of *In God We Trust, Inc.*, the 1981 EP from Dead Kennedys, wore this text on its B-side, (or backside if you consider the message).

At fourteen or fifteen years old, I can remember reading this message on a copy of the cassette I’d borrowed, (coincidentally with the full intent of dubbing it onto a blank tape), and thinking it was one of the most righteous things I’d ever seen, the band having left that side completely blank, its 15 or so minutes of actual music recorded on Side 1.

In God We Trust, Inc. has remained a significant album in my life for a few reasons:

1. The music, obviously.
2. The potential to be creative with cassettes became evident. Thinking about it now, the band was able to manipulate the format, simply leaving a side of it blank and thusly manufacturing a political and anti-commercial statement. In some ways, the tape itself made a bolder impression than the music.
3. The state of the record industry and the threat of its demise at the hands of cassette junkies eager to get their little hands all over purchased music so that it could be mass duplicated is laughable now. But seriously, how prophetic.

4. It was my introduction to cassette culture in relation to what some would now consider “filesharing.” I was officially tied to a primitively propagated but forward thinking lot who utilised available technology to influence its own primordial music education with a portable and versatile format.

“As a child of the 80s the cassette was *the* format,” says Mike Donovan, member of the San Franciscan lo-fi band Sic Alps and founder of the Folding Cassettes label. “I always bought cassettes new and dubbed them for friends. Later making mixtapes for cute girls became the art form.”

Cassettes: a means to fortify your music collection inexpensively, trade music, carry music and reproduce your own personalised albums all while keeping intact its physicality. The cassette is a relic that some still hold near and dear and it’s resurfaced in an age accustomed to digitised, intangible and disposable media. In the tradition of Do-It-Yourself underground philosophy, outsider artists and labels are finding ways to reinvigorate the format. “From my perspective there isn’t any attempt to make an impact on the physical or digital models that larger labels/artists and the majority of music on the whole follows,” states Nathaniel Ritter, owner of the cassette label Brave Mysteries whose roster includes Rose Croix, Wormsblood and Love Cult. “It is a way to provide a tangible product, an artefact if you will, to dedicated followers of underground music.”

The mission of many of these labels and artists is to keep music physical. Though vinyl has enjoyed a reawakening thanks to the immediate "hipness" factor the format's adopted, the cassette offers a cheap alternative to releasing music via download only. "In a lot of ways, releasing anything in the physical realm is purely to combat the digital." Kevin Stebner runs Bart Records, which has put out cassettes from obscure acts like GreyScreen, NEEDS and Sissys. "The really important thing for me is to put out music in actual physical form. Digital media is essentially disposable. I wanted to stray from that [though some Bart releases do come with downloads]. There is just something about the physicality of an actual music format, something one can hold and look at. There is so much more to 'music' than just the sound vibrations that enter your ears, but also the artwork you hold in your hand, the lyrics you read, the play button you press. Or, at a show, it's more than just the sound coming out of the speakers, it's also the sight of movement of fingers over guitar strings, the jostling of the people around you. So with digital, there is no physicality in just some text on the top of the iTunes screen. So, even if it's just a disgusting piece of pink plastic, there's at least that interaction and physicality in it."

"The ironic thing to me is that cassettes offer artists and labels the same thing that downloads do: a form of distribution for music that is cheaper and more flexible than manufacturing LPs or [to a lesser extent] CDs," says Bruce Adams, owner of Flingco Sound Systems (FSS). "The difference being that cassettes give artists the possibility to package music in very individualised ways."

"Portable, easy to produce and inexpensive, you can make as many as you want, you can tape over them if you want so they're better for the environment, they look cool, if you lose a Walkman you don't lose ALL of your music." Ben Parrish,

owner of the cassette label Dog Daze Tapes, released 'DEMO' in 2010, a cassette compilation of the demo tracks that comprised singer/guitarist Marnie Stern's debut album for Kill Rock Stars, 'In Advance of the Broken Arm'. "When I started Dog Daze I wanted to do a few things," Parish explained. "Keep things in print, pay artists fairly, not have to sell all my belongings to fund releases, etc. The cassette/digital combo seemed like the easiest way to do that."

Karl Hofstetter of Joyful Noise, though, feels that digital music has allowed for physical media to regain its footing in the digital age. "Digital music has worked against the CD [and will eventually cause its extinction]," he begins. "But it has contributed to consistent and substantial increases in vinyl sales. I believe it's the main reason for the cassette resurgence. The need for the super-fan to have a physical object isn't going away, it's just no longer essential to have the object in order to hear the music. The fact that physical mediums are now a luxury and not a necessity is resulting in physical music becoming more limited, more elaborate, and more specialised. And the cassettes are a part of this movement. We also package nearly all of our releases with digital download codes, so the preferred practical media is being combined with interesting and worthwhile physical objects."

Joyful Noise reissued *Bug*, the classic album from Dinosaur Jr., on a limited run cassette. The selling point with this reissue was that, at the time of its initial release in 1987, cassettes were preferred and *Bug* had been originally released that way. "This was [I think] the first cassette reissue on its original format ever," says Hofstetter. "I was kind of amazed at the amount of people who told us they still had these albums on cassette, or that they owned them at one time. I think for those people who grew to love Dinosaur Jr. in the 80s by listening to the cassette, it was really

special for them to see it back in the original format. And in that sense it's probably more 'authentic' to them than a CD reissue."

I still own a tape deck. Call it intuition, call it a need to cling to the past, I remember turntables being disposed of in the name of the almighty CD twenty or thirty years ago, prodigal sons caught up in the mania of digital progress only to later realise how good they had it. Their ritualistic listening was minimised by ease of track selection, their sound was levelled out and sadly reduced by file compression. Steve Albini had a point when he said, "Fuck digital," though few of us seemed to listen.

Though I'll admit my fondness for new music on cassettes waned once I'd acquired a CD player in the early 90s, I was never without the means to play or record with them, fascinated with the idea of crafting my own individualised versions of THE perfect album, one that adhered to my sensibilities regarding genre, song sequencing, long cuts as opposed to quick transitions, etc. It's this obsessiveness that I carry as nostalgic baggage, still tied to those long evenings in my teenage bedroom attentive to that shrinking spool of advancing tape, hoping it would provide just enough room to get in one last song.

Cassettes granted me access to a very expansive world that I'd not yet even begun to explore and memories of this very visceral period in my life are some of the clearest I have.

"I fell asleep listening to tapes as a child. My dad didn't trust me with his turntable and records, so he'd dub tapes of my favourite records for me to listen to on my own." Ritter reminisces, "The tape also allowed for me to begin experimenting with recording at a very young age. Disabling the erase head and (*recording on*) a tape over and over again with (*a*) Casio, tambourine, and my 4-year old

stream of consciousness ramblings are some of my earliest and strongest childhood memories."

"I've been listening to tapes since the early 90s when my brother would send me mixtapes in the mail from college of all the interesting new bands going on in the underground," says Parrish. "I got to hear a bunch of copies of stuff from tape labels like Shrimper, Union Pole, some early K Records tapes and 7"s, New Bad Things, Pavement bootlegs, Huggy Bear, etc. It was awesome."

Parrish continues, "So listening to tape hiss and stuff has never been a barrier to me. It was weird when bands like Vivian Girls and Wavves came out and were being called lo-fi because it sounded a million times better to the 3rd generation copies of Irving Klaw Trio songs I'd heard on mixtapes!"

"Old technology doesn't really die it just bumps along in a sort of subterranean realm of secret users, kind of like magic and alchemy," observes Dylan Carlson, lead guitarist of the Seattle drone band, Earth. "Also analogue recording and listening technologies are superior in every way to digital ones. Reality is analog, digital is a product of the materialist/rationalist paradigm and is doomed to destruction. Cassettes are like the 'perennial philosophy' of hermeticism."

Once CDs phased out cassettes in the 90s, tape decks more or less disappeared from mainstream outlets. The last portable cassette Walkman was manufactured in 2010, which, considering how much music resides in external hard drives, laptops and iPods these days, is kind of amazing. Being that tape decks and boomboxes are relatively scarce outside of eBay and other online specialty vendors or shopping sites, could one consider releasing music on cassette as catering to elitism or perpetuating musical exclusivity?

"I don't think that my label is trying to be exclusive by selling tapes, but we do have a very specialised audience." André Foisy is a member of the ambient, experimental metal band, Locrian, and owner of Land Of Decay, which releases the music of his own band along with Gates, ThisQuietArmy and *Cultus Sabbati*. "We're a very specialised community. We play music that isn't the most accessible thing in the world. Most people in my neighbourhood aren't going to be interested in picking up the demos that Servile Sect made in 2005/2006, for example."

"Well, some people are always going to have a negative reaction towards things they don't understand," says Parrish. "I wouldn't say that tape decks or boomboxes are that scarce, though. I saw about 15 tape decks at Goodwill yesterday, affordably priced between \$8 and \$25. Then I went to Fred Meyer a few blocks away and they were selling iPods for \$250. From a financial standpoint, I'd say that's much more elitist."

Donovan, however, doesn't hesitate to call it like he sees it. "For sure," he says.

Having brought up the means by which to play albums on cassette, there is a perception of the format that it remains inferior next to vinyl or digital, the drawbacks being tape hiss or other incidental sounds from moving parts.

"Cassettes have as good a sound quality as vinyl, it just depends on the cassettes used," Carlson says. "I try to avoid anything over 60 minutes because the tape is thinner and has a tendency to stretch. As long as you keep tape heads clean and de-magnetised, you are fine. Any sound issues are usually poorly cared for equipment rather than the cassette."

Stebner protests the notion that sound quality is an issue with cassettes. "Pure and total falsehood," he declares. "I could

go on and on about the fallacies of the strength of digital, the reasons why the best records are recorded to magnetic tape, the digital processes that merely attempt to capture the warmth of tape, how magnetic tape captures the unbroken wave and not a construction of little blocks. That cassettes have poor sound quality is a misnomer: it is a different kind of sound. I'll take the warmth and hiss of cassettes over the *tinny-ness* and shrill frequencies of CDs any day. Do not heed the propagandists."

But, acknowledging that there are incidental noise factors present when listening to music on cassette, do some artists benefit from the format?

"Music that is poorly recorded in a digital home-studio environment benefits from the tape 'warming' up the sound and smoothing out some of the nastiness that can come from those types of recordings," says Ritter. "Music that is recorded on tape, for example on a cheap 4-track recorder, might benefit from never leaving the analog realm and staying as close to the original sound as possible. I think a lot of the music being released on cassette actually suffers in the end because of fidelity loss. I'd like to see more music released on tape that is about songwriting than about sonic design."

Dan Katz of Dullest Records says, "Bands on a budget have been overjoyed that they have had to put zero money up and get a bunch of tapes because they cost us so little to make. It allows them to make money and us not to lose any, so it is very win-win. Also, with certain bands that pride themselves on lo-fi production (Black Metal especially), I think it gives them the sounds they are looking for."

Keeping in mind the cost associated with recording and putting out albums and about the music industry that seems to be in perpetual decline, the blame continually

put to filesharing and Internet piracy, have consumers been responsive to the availability of this product? Are cassettes really selling?

"They're selling, but not like hot cakes," says Parrish. "But, I've had to order more copies of each release from 'national audio company' and am proud that I've been able to pay royalties to all the artists that have agreed to work with me. It feels great. The lowest selling release on Dog Daze sold 150 copies and the best selling has sold a little over 300. Nothing huge but it's been sustainable and it's not like any of this stuff has huge commercial appeal or anything."

Adams says, "The FSS cassette releases have done well and sold their runs relatively quickly. One combination that worked really well was for the artist to take cassettes when they go on tour. People seem to like buying cassettes at shows."

"I can't say it's lucrative, but in the end, it mostly pays for itself," says Stebner. "I think people are stoked to get them, bands are stoked the music gets into peoples hands, I'm stoked I can make something and be active. Putting out 100 tapes, not losing any money, people hearing new music, bands making it. It's great!"

For Joyful Noise, Hofstetter says, "We have seen a great response. Most of our cassette releases sell out very quickly."

The struggle and effort to keep music tangible continues. With regard to cassettes now playing some role in the presence of physical music and the independent marketplace, (albeit a small one), Hofstetter says, "I don't think the cassette resurgence is just a trend, but I also don't expect cassette sales to reach anything close to vinyl or digital sales. I see it remaining a small niche, which music nerds will continue to either love or hate."

"Perhaps when the 1% all are living in Dubai, and the rest of the world is sunk back into poverty, they will return as the dominant form of music delivery," says Carlson. "Until then, they will be a specialist market similar to, but less pervasive, than vinyl."

"It's not a trend for us, though it probably is a trend for some people," says Foisy. "It's interesting that most tape labels today are primarily run via the Internet. I don't think that the Internet is going away and I don't think that cassettes will go away soon either."

"I think purely by people's own bias against the format that no, tapes will likely not return in any 'prominent' way," says Stebner. "Whatever. I'll just keep putting out things I think are rad any way I can. Collectors of new and interesting music will look for it in any way they can."

As purists continue putting stock in the artefacts of their affection, there will be a resistance to what many predict to be the extinction of physical media. As the underground tasks itself with distributing and producing challenging and non-commercial work, it functions through passion alone and a need to defy conventional modes of progress, technological or otherwise. The cassette defines this rebellion, a small but significant rebirth of an antiquated form fit for the purposes of networking, dissemination, enlightenment and for having to work toward your own personal enrichment. We do appreciate more what we earn and the relics from our past sometimes hang out to remind us not to take the things we love for granted.

Super Vinyl Sweep

At Mattmar Loppis you can walk away with a shopping trolley full of vinyl for just £15. The world's finest record store or a recipe for financial disaster?

By David Coleman



To an audience raised on high stakes risk/reward game shows like *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* and *Deal or No Deal*, the concept of *Supermarket Sweep* must seem hilariously quaint.

As I remember it, each episode began with a clumsy grocery-themed quiz – “How much does a kilo of courgettes cost?”, “Which contains more calories, a Snickers bar or a can of Vimto?” – before culminating in an equally clumsy live action race up and down the aisles of a fake supermarket.

I was just 11 years old when I first saw *Supermarket Sweep* and while the show itself wasn't exactly great, there was something about that climactic sweep that

captured my youthful imagination in a way that family trips to Tesco never quite did. And it seems I was not alone. The show's grand finale also left an indelible mark on Swedish vinyl enthusiast Jonas Staf.

When Staf opened his *loppis* (flea-market) in the tiny Swedish village of Mattmar, he tapped into his own *Supermarket Sweep* memories to create a most unique shopping experience, which he has dubbed the *mörkerloppis*.

“The idea for the *mörkerloppis* probably came from a 90s TV show where they competed in teams to pick food in a grocery store,” Staf reveals, “and the winners were the ones who managed to come out with the most valuable haul.”

But Jonas Staf is not selling groceries.

Despite its remote location in the Swedish province of Jämtland, midway between the fashionable ski resort of Åre and the idyllic lakeside city of Östersund, *Mattmar Loppis* has a monumental stock of vinyl records and CDs. The fact that such a place even exists in a village with a population of just 143 is noteworthy in itself, but the concept of the *mörkerloppis* elevates Staf's flea-market onto another level entirely.

For an entry fee of 150 SEK (around £15), two people gain access to a special space in the shop, the *mörkerloppis*. This area – an old school gymnasium – is packed full of records, CDs, and other assorted items, “things that are worth £5 and other items worth up to £300”. A shopping cart is provided for convenience and over the course of 90 seconds, the shoppers are allowed to fill the cart with anything that takes their fancy.

“Most manage to come out with things worth between £250 and £400 and they have a lot of fun when they're in there,” Staf adds.

If this all sounds too good to be true, however, it's probably because it is.

“While there is no limit on how much you get to pick,” Staf clarifies, “you have to be careful because if you happen to break something, you must leave all of your items behind.”

There's another catch, the clue being very much in the name of the room. *Mörkerloppis* literally translates as ‘dark flea-market’. That's right – the room is completely dark. Pitch black. Shoppers are given a simple headlamp to help them on their treasure hunt. It's not supposed to be easy, but it is supposed to be good fun. And as you'd expect, Staf's experiment is paying off:

“So far, around 30 people have entered the *mörkerloppis* and the response has been laughter and just plain fun. Some have had a few goes, and several have invited friends. Someone even came to celebrate a birthday. We have had visitors from Norway, Stockholm and Gothenburg who have all tried it, but we do not know if they came because they'd heard the rumour or just happened to be there for other reasons. Either way, many people are traveling 300-400km just to check out our selection of records. A lot of visitors are saying that in terms of LPs, our range is at least as good, if not better, than many record stores that are in the big cities.”

Mattmar Loppis may be thriving, but in doing so it is very much bucking the trend for record stores in Sweden, as Staf explains:

“In Sweden it has been difficult to find good record stores as many went out of business in the early 2000s. It became easier and more profitable to sell online and it is probably also the case that many began to download their music instead of buying physical formats, forcing many retailers to close their shops.”

It's a familiar tale – I'm sure all of us can reel off a list of once cherished record shops that have gone to the wall in the last 10-15 years – but rather than complain about the prevailing winds in music retail, Jonas Staf has used his creativity to offer an experience that the likes of iTunes will never be able to match. His *mörkerloppis* might not provide a comprehensive answer to all of the industry's problems, but it is a perfect example of how creative thinking can re-energise a customer base. When was the last time you travelled hundreds of kilometres just to visit a record store?

Linda Perhacs: Eternal Flower Child

Forty four years after her releasing her stunning debut, the cult folk musician is back with a follow-up.

By Juan Edgardo Rodríguez



In the beginning of the seventies, the rustic Topanga Canyon hillside overlooking the increasingly busy concrete of the city of Los Angeles housed a friendly community of musicians and artists looking to express their work in new and unconventional ways. One of those artists was Linda Perhacs, a mid-twenties dental hygienist who had a gift for writing esoteric folk songs that were a cleansing reaction to a post-World War II world being guzzled up by a rising capitalist consumer society and its mad rush for progress and development.

The story of Perhacs' musical career was triggered by sheer happenstance – one of her patients was Oscar and Emmy award-winning composer Leonard Rosenman,

who one day inquired about her other pursuits thinking that there was more to Perhacs outside of her day job. Rosenman, stricken by a concept she had pitched to him, expressed his desire to bring her concept into fruition. They created what ultimately became her debut *Parallelograms* in 1970, which was stealthily recorded in Universal Studios due to the persistent supervision of corporate heads.

After the poor commercial performance of *Parallelograms*, Perhacs settled back into a quiet life of reflection and spiritual growth. But as with any piece of art that distinguishes itself from the rigid commodities of pop consumption, *Parallelograms* gradually took on a life of

its own as a deeply beautiful and naturalistic work that gained more traction as years passed. It became something of a cult phenomenon, a source of inspiration for a diverse array of acts ranging from electronica wizards Daft Punk to prog-metal magnates Opeth. But it was the neo-psych folk movement of the early 2000s that unearthed her obscure work into relevancy. And as such, its major, likeminded proponents, Devendra Banhart, Joanna Newsom and Sufjan Stevens, were intent in bringing her back into the limelight. They embraced her as a meaningful and necessary figure, a beacon of light in our current times of strife and turmoil.

"I'm so sorry. Just a little out of breath because I come to work first where I do my clinical work. I'm still (mimics panting) from running from the parking," were the first words Perhacs said after she picked up my phone call at the bright and early time of 7 am. Her hurried demeanour is tangentially opposite to her overall calmness, a reflection of all the sudden attention she's received due to the recording of her first release in forty four years, *The Soul of All Natural Things*. In our hour-long exchange, we discuss how the neurological condition synaesthesia impacts her songwriting habits, the true reason why she kept silent all these years, and a handful of other topics in what she describes as "a little room with a coke machine".

So how did the process into writing The Soul of All Natural Things begin to take shape?

It all started when an internet radio station called Dub Lab put on a show in 2009 to celebrate their tenth anniversary. I got a call from Frosty, the person who runs Dub Lab, who called me out of the blue asking if I would participate in that celebration to perform my song "Parallelograms". That moment when he

called me I said: "Frosty, I've never been on stage. Do you really want me to stand by myself singing a 24 track harmony song with 24 layered tracks?"

That sounds like a Herculean task to achieve.

I put those together without any mechanical help. We didn't have digital help in those days so it was layered like a handmade tape. I had to sing each of those harmonies on top of the others very, very carefully. I don't know how I can reproduce that on stage. Frosty said, "Don't worry. You've got lots of musicians and singers in this whole area and whatever you need we'll help you". He called back about two weeks later and said, "Scratch the original plan. I want to take your entire 1970s album and use it as the theme for the whole show. We'll bring young acts that aren't as well known and each will choose a song. You can do as many songs as you can do off the album with us helping you. It'll be the theme for the whole night." And this is where I met Julia.

So this is how your collaborations with Julia Holter came to be?

She came in as a total unknown and sang my song "Delicious" at the REDCAT Theater. And there's little Julia, and what she did was just beautiful. So I ran backstage asking, "Where is she, where is she"? When I saw her, I put my arm around her and gave her a big hug. I told her, "Who are you? That was beautiful!". And that's how we started being friends.

I told her, "Julia, I've written a song that needs at least two hundred and fifty female voices. I saw you using foot pedals. Will you help me make this song come together because it needs to be done very delicately?" She quickly agreed. And that's how we started working on the song "Prism of Glass". She helped me with the

on the new album. Especially “Intensity”, which has some very avant garde harmonies. She’s marvellous with dissonant sounds, which I really love.

In working with younger musicians, have you found any similarities between the young bohemian types you were surrounded with in the seventies as opposed to those you’ve met in this current generation?

Even if I wasn’t on the physical plane I’d still be searching for those people. I happen to love them very much. I seek them out in my life because they understand energy, even as I was hearing things and seeing things inwardly that were indicative of sensitivity like synaesthesia, or a sensitivity of hearing their inner voice and using that to guide my life as well as to inspire the artistic in me. In the seventies, that was one arena of people where you could talk comfortably with them about this energy without them thinking you must be a little bit wacky. I do want to clarify that I’ve never been a drug user. Artificial things don’t work too well on me because my sensitivities are too high. I prefer just to stay natural always with food or anything. Even M.D.’s can’t get me to take medicines they sometimes want me to use.

But I could mix with that community because I already knew where they were coming from, and we could talk on those levels. I loved the hippie generation. I loved the psychedelic generation, and I was always welcome even if I was a teetotaler. They could also handle their conversations and their understandings because they were using that facet of themselves and it was their own pursuits. I didn’t realise how big and how vibrant the bohemian culture was in Silver Lake and Echo Park, for instance. It introduced me to a vast reservoir of artists. One taste and I knew I was on home ground again, and it was the same love I had in the

seventies for all the people in Topanga Canyon. So I’m at home with those people wherever I need them on the globe.

At which point in your life were you aware of these sensitivities?

It’s natural to me. It comes through my father’s bloodline. He worked in the military for about twenty years, and they would always come to him in World War II and say, “Arnold, we need your help. How much time do we have to land? We have to land this ship.” Imagine being there with all the lights off, and the engine off. It was very dangerous. They had to board an island so they would put him at the front of a boat. He would give them 12, 24 and 48 hour report takes in terms of what enemies were there or if they were present at the moment, or if they were already gone. They needed to know which inevitable truths they had to deal with if they landed on that specific island. And he was always so accurate that they needed him constantly for this perception.

How do all these energies inspire this creative process?

Many people, when they’re writing music, they just go to a keyboard and start methodically in an organised way until they work their way into something that sounds good. I don’t write music like that. Never have. It pours to me like rain, and I have to race to find pen and paper to catch it before my synergy begins to lose part of it. And then I go to the keyboard to put it into form laboriously and slowly. It comes through like a flood. I mean, it’s seconds! And I have to grab it before it disappears. Those are the best pieces, when they come like that, but that’s not something predictable and it’s been occurring since childhood.

When I was writing the song “Soul of All Natural Things”, there was definitely a light in the room above my head. And I

didn't turn the lightbulb on. It wasn't a physical light, and it would show around midnight every night for a series of months while I tried to put that piece together. The song "Parallelograms" came that way. I couldn't write it down fast enough before I lost parts of it. I had to pull off the freeway and write it on little pieces of paper. I did not hear the music. I saw a visual display of colours in a synaesthesia way and had to write it down visually like a drawing.

Speaking of Parallelograms, what are your thoughts knowing it is such an important document to some people, almost to the point where it needed to be saved from obscurity?

I believe it has the essence of that era. I'll give you my personal opinion. The people in the age bracket that created music in the '60s and '70s? You have to go back to who their parents were, the parents of young people who faced World War II. The whole world was screaming inside, "God help us. This is hell." There were horrible things going on in that era, especially in England. And the US had to help rescue this insanity. We just stepped in because we had to keep the world from going into more of that awful negative chaos, which was slaughtering people. So when you have humanity crying out to the Universe, no matter the language, you have a mass big enough asking for help. The universe will answer you and it will descend; as I put in my words, souls will appear, that are going to bring gifts of inspiration.

The young people in the 60s and 70s were not here by accident. We were needed and we were wanted. We were tuned in to this whirl of energy that was more positive than anything we'd ever experienced or known about. We started looking into Eastern religion and cooking. We would cross-reference writings from Europe and incorporate rhythms from African and Celtic people. We were mixing everything and loving it, and loving one another. It

was a special era and that was because we are the children of people who cried out for help. For more love, more positivity, and more humanity and harmony among nations.

It never seems as if there's an adversarial force in your records, or at least there's never any presence of quarrel or conflict.

We were all involved in the same thing. Expanding our consciousness so that we could overcome some of the arguments in the world that were troubling us.

Although, you do issue a very direct message in the track "Immunity". It speaks about how we're gradually becoming desensitised to everything that surrounds us, whether it's nature or human interaction. And yet it's one of the more fun tracks as opposed to the more methodical and serene ones.

I wanted that song to go much further in a serious direction, but my co-producers Fernando [Perdomo] and Chris [Price] wanted to invoke a more positive and upbeat energy. So the song went in a little bit of a different direction. They are just so exuberant when they get behind the keyboards, so it went in a little more of a commercial sound. Which isn't like me, but I said, "Alright, let's just have fun with it".

Another strong element in the album is the enrapturing need for love on a higher level. Which, in turn, made me think of your intimate moments on record. "Delicious" is actually a favourite of mine. I always thought the person you are referring to in the song must've been the luckiest man alive, how there's a thirst of love and lust present that's increasingly hard to find.

As a young person, love was very important to me. It's sacred ground, and it's not a casual arena for me to want. And our world treats relationships, I think, too

casually. The song “Delicious” was definitely expressing that when it comes to love. It’s a precious subject and it’s not something I treat casually.

I had to go into some silent years because I found that the relationships around me were too brief and casual, and I didn’t like that. I wanted a deeper, truer love, and in order to get there I had to climb spiritually into a state of being able to love on a higher level because I wasn’t too pleased with the casualness that I was running into. So I spent many years reading very deep books and developing a higher plane of love.

Were you approached to make more music in that period?

People would constantly say, “What happened to you?” And I said I was working inwardly to endure the casualness that we have in the physical plane, and it was because, as you heard in that song, love is too important to me. It’s the first and total priority in my life. I’ve just now learned to express it on a higher level and to stay peaceful. The casualness is too overwhelming for my sensitivities, so I just remove myself from that arena and started climbing upward. Once I got to a certain level, I was not going to be suffering or feeling vulnerable by those things anymore. I just had to rise above it. So you perceived something in “Delicious” that was very truthful, but it still needed more work (laughs). My greatest love is for God at this point.

Lastly, what would you like to provide to the listener in this new record?

When you’re a little older your vision of what you court in life is a little bit broader, and you start thinking about the whole world rather than just one relationship between just you and a boyfriend or girlfriend; that becomes only a tiny part of

a microscope. My greatest desire is to help anyone who listens, from the tones and modalities of this album, to feel a transcendence in the music that will help to lift them into that level of thought so that they can connect more easily with a higher level of prayer, love and contemplation. To let them out of their problems long enough so that they can see it a bit more clearly with a broader viewpoint or sensitivity.

I cannot sell hate for dollars. Anybody that’s generating hate and selling it for dollars is going to [sound like] feedback, and it’s not the best thing to do. I would rather send love, and it’d mean more than anything if they can have a connectedness with God. Building that connection has been the most valuable thing I’ve ever done, and I wish that for everybody.

Are We International?

How has our experience of “world music” changed in the digital age?

By Stephen Wragg

At last year’s Tramlines festival, I spent a fair bit of time at the world music stage, mostly to see the excellent Shangaan Electro. Between bands, a video was shown which included interviews centred around the seemingly meaningless phrase, “We are international”, which seemed to be based around the University of Sheffield’s admission of students of many different nationalities – but as the crowd were encouraged to chant the phrase back it began to lose meaning. I began to realise that this said a lot about how we approach the idea of “multiculturalism” in Britain; that a liberal politics of “political correctness” is frequently uncritical, erasing cultural differences so that they will supplement the idea of diversity in western culture.

Although clearly well-intentioned, the idea of, “We are international”, is troublingly vague as a statement. On the one hand it’s nice to encourage acceptance of multiple cultures, especially in the face of rising Europe-wide support for right-wing extremism, but it’s also clear that the phrase only works coming from a western position of privilege, with other cultures remaining at a distance. It’s supposed to be a universal gesture, but it simply wouldn’t make sense coming from the oppressed workers of the developing world employed by western multi-national corporations.

Significantly for me though, it was the power of music which supposedly had this universalising effect. The phrase “world music” in itself carries the same dodgy meaninglessness of “We are international”; smudging together different cultures as if

they don’t have certain contradictory elements. However, the act of listening itself seems fairly innocent. I often hear about how the internet makes it possible, more than ever, to hear recordings from all corners of the globe – yet I imagine that most listeners still have a limited range of encounters with world music, as much as we may think we like the idea of broadening our horizons. The internet has a tendency to disperse localised trends, but I don’t see it doing anything to dismantle the hierarchy of west as centre, and the rest of world as its periphery. It’s easier for a band of white boys with guitars to display the influence of some King Sunny Adé, Ali Farka Touré or Kanda Bongo Man records (NB: that’s a self-consciously indiscriminate group of examples) and cross over, but scarcely are we hearing the real thing – “world music” exists more as second-hand influence than as an authentically integral part of the internet-age music landscape. In other words, I think that world music is being mentioned more frequently, but more in terms of what western musicians are borrowing from than as the centre of attention.

The age of globalisation has enabled some contingencies, though. I suppose “Gangnam Style” is the most obvious example of world music crossover. Although it was fascinating to see a Korean-language song about Korean culture explode so much, one wonders if Psy became a western import because he is so comical, and if his foreignness became a part of why he became so accepted. The song itself didn’t really break any rules of western chart-pop; it didn’t disrupt the sounds of mainstream radio music. But,

looking to the more underground realm of critical acclaim rather than sales figures, which ostensibly prides itself on open-mindedness – it's still difficult to pinpoint the luminaries of present day non-western music.

It's likely that the "world music" which does get talked about is mediated by western collaborations – for instance, Tinariwen recruiting TV on the Radio for their Grammy-winning album, *Tassili*. Perhaps just as famous are the westerners who make their own "world music"; it was the slightly ironic title of Swedish psych-rockers Goat's globetrotting debut album, for instance. Referencing the general "contempt" which usually accompanies the phrase, band member Christian Johansson told The Quietus that, "The title, *World Music*, was chosen because we believe we play 'world music', and that's what we think everyone plays". It is perhaps with a finer sense of irony that LA-based African music/indie-pop crossover group Fool's Gold is named – as if to say, you think you're hearing African music, but it isn't quite the real thing.

I can only go so far without mentioning Vampire Weekend. I feel as if I've seen more snide references to this band's appropriation of African popular music than I've seen writing about actual African music. It's a shame that they got so much (often negative) attention without really seeming to spur an increased interest in authentically African styles of music. This says a lot about the effects of globalisation on music consumption; that the availability of African music to western listeners allows it to form an influence and become interpolated in the music of Vampire Weekend and their imitators, but the "real thing" doesn't see the same benefits of globalisation, losing its cultural context.

And that's the reason I started writing this piece: I'd love for the internet to be able to

reflect the scope of its ability to present so much information from across the globe at once, by widening the discourse available on music from across the world. The internet theoretically presents us with whichever distributed music we could possibly want to listen to, but it doesn't dismantle the west-centric hegemony of music writing. I'm as guilty as anyone of neglecting non-western music; I'm writing partly in order to think through my difficulties in working out what "world music" to listen to, or even more challengingly, how to write about it. There's the conundrum: how can I make a judgement of this art without being able to do justice to its cultural specificity? And if I can't do that, does that mean I should just ignore it?

Most of my exposure to "world music" has a homogenising tendency. Inauthentic pastiches of world music might be used in adverts or film scores, like a colour palette rather than a whole scene. "Real" world music might be heard on compilation CDs, for instance, the Rough Guide series, which effectively condense the musical output of an entire region to one CD (titles are often simply the name of a country – Hungary, Cuba, Japan). Here, bell hooks' notion of Eating the Other (the essay which first made me properly question "multiculturalism") is most obvious: "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture". Commodities like this are sold with the implicit promise of helping the listener accept more diversity, but there's a problem with the fact that a culture is being sold as commodity. The listener of a CD like this isn't so much engaging with and learning from a new culture, but keeping it at arm's length, using it as "spice".

What the Rough Guides sell isn't so much art as a sort of armchair tourism, but an

encounter with a foreign culture. There are, certainly, labels who present world music with more nuance than the Rough Guides, not as tourism but as art: Soul Jazz, Honest Jon's and Finders Keepers (which is a horribly colonialist name for a label that sells world music to a western audience) present more particularised music, but it's hard to say if any type of presentation will absolve the western listener of that problem of "eating the other". Also, their releases are usually archival, various artists compilations rather than singular albums, and are seldom widely-reviewed, not fulfilling the criteria of relevance demanded by the snowballing online journalism of the information age.

Even weighing up the presentation of world music by these labels, there always a difficulty of taking world music without preconceptions. One of my pet peeves is when people complain that music writers should stop writing around the music and take it at "face value". I need some context to properly experience any type of music; I need some perspectives on where the music's coming from and how to enjoy it rather than just a description of how it unfolds.

This is generally a relatively easy task when addressing western music, but to properly tackle an album of music from a specifically foreign musical heritage would require a level of knowledge beyond the reach of most western reviewers. With pretty much any given musical culture there are entire schools of thought and musical concepts which don't really have western equivalents, and with them entire new branches of aesthetic values with which "world music" is being composed. For instance, the concept of "ma", or negative space, in Japanese art, performs a very different function to rests and silence in western music. Another example is the recitation of the Qur'an (qira'at) in Islam, which is not considered music, but

contains melody and rhythm. These aren't the sort of things that your standard 500-word album review is going to tackle.

In the west we're familiar, to an extent, with how the sociological function of different genres of music varies from genre to genre; even THIS varies from clique to clique, and it changes how music will be judged aesthetically. Across the globe there are religious, traditional, and technological differences which affect the ways in which music is received, distributed, and performed.

Anthropologists have never found a culture for which music doesn't have a social function, but every imaginable aspect of music will have its endless particularities dependent on its culture. Effectively, then, without a working knowledge of so many other musical traditions – which will frequently have radically different nomenclature and aesthetic aims – it's very difficult to avoid falling into the trap of privileging the west as the site of musical canon and innovation, while struggling to recognise what "world music" represents critically.

A prime example is Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the great Pakistani singer. His music was always a part of the tradition of Qawwali, a sacred form of singing important in Sufism with origins in the 13th century. Later in his career, he began to collaborate with western musicians, writing songs for a few Hollywood soundtracks. He collaborated with producer Michael Brook for the albums *Mustt Mustt* and *Night Song*, which further established his acceptance from western audiences. Unsurprisingly, these pieces intended for western audiences dilute the musical heritage of Qawwali and render the music more intelligible to western audiences. It's not that these recordings are any less worth your time than the longer and more obviously devotional Qawwali recordings; it's about recognising the ways in which "world music" accepted in the west is

necessarily filtered. Under a hegemony that purports westernness to be a default, it's often more difficult to recognise the west's own strange, untranslatable particularities.

There's a danger too about that assumption that "We are international", even in the seemingly innocent practice of listening habits. Go and listen to as much music from as many cultures as possible. But recognise the flaws in the idea that the internet can tie together so many strands of international cultures. There's more at our fingertips than ever before, that is undeniable – but now that the voyage of discovery is so often reduced to a few idle mouse clicks across an algorithm of "recommended artists", hence we struggle to see it as a challenge. This might go for all music in the internet age, but particularly regarding cultural diversity; we are gaining access to more and more music, at the expense of the context that makes it intelligible, the work we must put in to recognise the reasons why it exists.



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Waiting For Superman

A dissection of Hollywood's continuing love affair with the superhero film.

By Alan Shulman

As a boy, I went through a love affair with Lego, as most boys will. My favourite Lego-related project would be building a skyscraper; something along the lines of the Empire State building, since though the Twin Towers were bigger they held little architectural interest to a budding Gropius. Then, after much planning, crafting and connecting, when I finally had a towering structure that rose majestically into the heavens of my bedroom, I would think of some creative way of destroying the whole thing. One day it would be an earthquake, another a raging monster; dare I say I even flew a plane or two into these buildings. Sad to say, this was the best part! Later, as I grew out of some of my toys, I retired my Evil Knievel action figure by stabbing him with a pencil and hanging him by the neck with an old sneaker string, while sending his Snake River Canyon vehicle for one last jump in a burst of lighter fluid induced flame.

When I wasn't wreaking havoc on my imaginary plastic world, I was probably pretending to be somebody else. Invariably I would pick someone who, unlike myself, could get things done. Sure, I could go with Superman or Luke Skywalker saving the universe if the occasion called for it, but I was just as happy pretending to be a slightly older, more physically confident kid, stranded on a deserted island with my friends, facing more plebeian challenges like wild animals and pirates. I've been reflecting on my childhood fantasies a lot lately in an attempt to understand the spate, the wave, the deluge of superhero and apocalyptic films that have dominated the box office for the past decade. Though ostensibly

deserving of different genre labels, I've come to see them through a common prism and will use the term superlyptic to describe them. Typically they revolve around themes of fantastic power and destruction. I don't share my fellow citizens' enthusiasm for superlyptic films, but I do share the same DNA, and there was a time when my pleasure centre was aroused by extravagant, supernatural fantasy. So I set out to understand why these movies appeal to children, particularly boys, and more interestingly, why this appeal has so come to dominate the mainstream in the 21st century.

Brooding on my childhood fantasies I was reminded again and again of one absurd yet strangely compelling image – the destruction of the White House scene from the 1996 blockbuster *Independence Day*. Even though for years I was convinced it was a by-product of digital technology that had advanced to the degree that it made extravagant, somewhat realistic explosions like this one possible, it turns out that this scene represents the great last gasp of analog special effects. The White House used in the film was actually a large scale model destroyed in the real, not virtual, world. Even so, *Independence Day* either influenced or foresaw a new phase of fatalistic filmmaking, and no significant structure built by human hands would be safe. Nanomites in *G.I. Joe: Rise of the Cobra* made a tasty meal out of the Eiffel Tower; autobots made short work of the Great Pyramid of Giza in *Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen*; and Guy Fawkes finally fulfilled his lifelong dream of blowing Parliament to smithereens in *V for Vendetta*. The Millennium Bridge, the

Empire State Building, the Golden Gate Bridge, Capitol Records, there's hardly a well known structure in the world that has escaped destruction since the mid 90s.

Yet while London Bridges have been falling down (*Harry Potter*), one should not despair! At any given Cineplex around the world, at any given time, you are sure to find a superhero, who only recently was a regular guy experiencing some scientifically dubious mishap, enacting a comical sequence adjusting to his new powers, and is now ready to save the world from villains dressed even more flamboyantly than himself (I'd say herself too, but superchicks have had a hard time at the box office, for reasons that will become clear soon enough).

Used to be you had to wait a while for a *Superman* or a *Batman* to come along, but in recent years we've seen such an apparent demand for super-help, that the theatres have been flooded with such second and third tier heroes as *Spiderman*, *The Green Lantern*, *The Green Hornet*, *Daredevil*, the *X-Men*, the *Fantastic Four*, *Captain America*, *The Hulk*, *Iron Man*, *Catwoman*, *Thor*, *Elektra*, *Ghost Rider*, *Hellboy*, and whatever Scarlett Johansson was in *The Avengers*. The women on this list gained little traction amongst moviegoers apart from a general agreement that they looked good in their tight bodysuits. This should not surprise us if we consider the root of the genre's popularity, which is the lingering strength of the fantasies of boyhood – a time when girls were an undiscovered country none of us cared to visit. Yet if we want to enlighten ourselves as to the ultimate source of these cataclysmic dreams and soaring fantasies, we must turn to thinkers writing before and during the dawn of film itself, Sigmund Freud and Frederick Nietzsche.

In 1920's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud first proposed the idea of the death

drive, whose goal it is to lead us back to the inorganic matter from which we sprang. Also called Thanatos (in opposition to the life drive Eros), this instinct manifests itself in the tendency to relive trauma (such as war experiences) and even seek out traumatic experience, in direct contradiction to the Pleasure Principle. Like many things that Freud proposed, this has no basis in any empirical scientific reality, but has an almost irresistible intuitive and even poetic appeal. Whether or not we are really trying to rejoin with the mud, we sense the truth in the idea that we get a vicarious thrill from thoughts of our own destruction. And I'd argue that our perpetual fascination with apocalypticism now manifesting itself in the cinema, the most spectacular of art forms, is an outgrowth of whatever compels these thoughts. From the ancient flood myths of Gilgamesh to the Book of Revelations, we see that this preoccupation is nothing new. It's just that digital technology has now made it possible to realise any and all visions of earthly devastation – and in 3D! God, being the ultimate projection of ourselves, busies himself with creating the universe and us along with it, only to quickly turn around and annihilate us and everything we've created, just as I had done with my Lego. Talk about a hall of mirrors!

But perhaps an even more elementary concept was expressed by Frederick Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – the Will to Power. Influenced by Schopenhauer's thoughts on the Will to Live, Nietzsche considered the Will to Power to be more fundamental, since some people will sacrifice their lives for more power. Again we are in the realm of philosophy and literature here, as opposed to strict science, but this idea nicely explains much of what we see lately on the big screen, not to mention the real world. It's not much of a leap to conclude that much of our superhero fantasies have their root in our desire for power over our fellow

mortals. Children particularly fall prey to this desire since they are in a naturally vulnerable position until they reach maturity. “Oh if only I could fly”, we wish when bored with being earthbound; “If only I could spin a web”, the better to humiliate the tough boys, we think. And so forth. Skewed to a young demographic with way too much money to spend for their own good, the movies reflect these fantasies back to our kids and naturally they dig them; good, bad or indifferent. Obviously as we mature and take our place in society as the powerful and mostly powerless, we project this will outward and eventually end up bombing, being bombed, or passively watching the bombing from the bleachers. The trick is explaining why more and more fully grown men and women (but mostly men) are eagerly awaiting the next X-Men movie. *Iron Man 3* doesn’t gross a billion dollars playing only to pre-pubescent kids. Why have these childhood fantasies rooted in relative weakness and vulnerability been extended into adulthood?

One possible answer to this question is the progressive political and economic disenfranchisement of young people first entering adulthood. Faced with shitty job prospects with little chance for career advancement, some may choose to bow out rather than enter a rat race with no cheese at the end. Better to wallow in the comfort of nostalgic feelings for a period of life with little responsibility and easy thrills. A more controversial but still compelling reason may be the role of a weakening education system, which fails to prepare kids for the realities and challenges of 21st century life. I’d add the breakdown of family support structures that had the time and inclination to promote and inculcate education, to this systemic failure. Do you expect kids, who barely scrape through *The Red Pony* in high school, to appreciate the mythical dimensions of a film like *There Will Be Blood*, much less a Shakespeare adaptation?

On the other hand, maybe they wouldn’t mind a taste of the old bard if that was what was marketed to them. Perhaps the movie business, now global with stakes raised accordingly, has grown to the point where little or nothing may be risked. As Steven Soderbergh recently articulated so well, movies made in Hollywood are now aimed at an international audience, the demands of which boil down to the simple formulation, “less words, more explosions”. So, bottom line, if you like going to the movies, this is what you’re going to get. And since no one can deny the allure of the spectacle, everybody’s happy. Well, maybe not everybody, but everybody who matters when it comes time to reconcile the debits and credits, because while older people, interested in mature subject matter, complain about the dearth of choices for them at the local cineplex, they don’t hold a candle to the reliability and staying power of the early adolescents and stunted 20 to 40-somethings in terms of spending their allowance. Eventually the old cranks will die off and no one will be left to bitch and moan. It’s the old supply/demand side argument, figuratively for critics like me, but quite literally for Harvey Weinstein’s accountants.

A younger man might come down on one side of the edger or the other, but I’ve come to realise that life is just a never ending succession of events proving you wrong. So I leave it to you to consider. Either way it doesn’t give one much hope, in the absence of some countervailing force, that things will change or improve in the immediate future. It could well be that this particular form of globalisation may raise up the huddled masses around the world, making them demand a little more saffron in their bouillabaisse, and we will all benefit. Or maybe the kids and über-kids will get sick of the same old superlyptic shit and draw the line when they put out the *Green Badger*. Don’t hold your breath, but what is life without hope?

I Heart Pop

The story of one critic's love affair with chart pop music.

By Joe Rivers

What's your earliest childhood memory? A particularly exciting birthday party or some moment of unspeakable trauma that seems adorably inconsequential in hindsight, perhaps? Well, aside from a deeply unsettling dream about being eaten by a giant in a travel agency and stubbing my toe on an uncharacteristically persistent kitchen unit in Lanzarote, the first thing I can clearly recall is Cher getting to #1 in the UK singles chart with "The Shoop Shoop Song (It's In His Kiss)". It was April 1991 and I was four years old.

This all sounds like journalistic hubris and similar to the kind of thing new artists say when trying to prove their credentials. "Oh, I grew up listening to Joni Mitchell and The Band," they protest when, like the rest of us, their parents listened to the popular music of the time and a couple of Motown compilations. However, my admission is true. I remember the video with its monochrome nod to the 60s girl group sound and I remember it being on Top Of The Pops the week it reached the summit of the charts.

That was probably the birth of my borderline unhealthy obsession with the pop charts. Seeing as it combined two of my main loves – music and numbers – it was hardly surprising. For a worryingly large number of points in the first decade of my life, I can remember what the key songs of the time were. I remember how excited I was as 2 Unlimited's Eurodance smash, "No Limit", inched up the charts to depose the Whitney Houston behemoth, "I Will Always Love You". I also always refer to it as "No Limit", not "No Limits" as many people are wont to do (as true fans

know, *No Limits* was the name of the single's parent album). I recall asking my Mum why was Gabrielle's "Dreams" was regarded as the highest debut new entry at #2, when Queen and George Michael's *Five Live EP* had entered the charts at #1 a few weeks previously (yes, it was here I learnt the meaning of the word 'debut').

This continued throughout my childhood. While some people of a certain vintage fondly recall the evening Nirvana knowingly flunked their way through "Smells Like Teen Spirit" on Top Of The Pops, my memories are of seeing Strike perform "U Sure Do" and a snippet of the video for The Bucketheads' "The Bomb! (These Sounds Fall Into My Mind)" in the top ten rundown. Like any pre-pubescent child, it was the sound of the popular dance music of the time that enthralled me, and my first ever albums were dance compilation cassettes that I listened to obsessively on my lime green Walkman (*Energy Rush Safe Six* – the pun was lost on me – and *On A Dance Tip 2*, if you're interested).

The trend continued. As I reached double figures, I began to subscribe to Smash Hits! magazine (fuelled by an ill-advised love of *MMMbop*-ers, Hanson) and started to purchase full length LPs – *Spice* by The Spice Girls, *Naked* by Louise, *Alisha Rules The World* by Alisha's Attic. And during this period I purchased singles with increasing regularity, from indie classics like Super Furry Animals' "Do Or Die" to ubiquitous chart fodder like Ricky Martin's "Livin' La Vida Loca".

Naturally, as I grew older and puberty

came, I began to take myself far too seriously. Out went the ephemeral, instantaneous hit of pop, and in came inward-looking, contemplative indie-rock. *My Now That's What I Call Music!* collections were shunned in favour of what I thought of as “real” music, which at the time mainly seemed to consist of Ash, Feeder, Green Day and Incubus.

Whilst my years advanced and my horizons broadened, alternative and indie music remained at the core. At the start of the century, I firmly aligned myself in the baggy jean-wearing, nu-metal appreciating crowd, but in retrospect, I see that it's 2-step and the spasmodic R&B of Timbaland et al that has truly stood the test of time.

As my near-obsessive interest in music grew (and my musical ability stagnated), it seemed only natural that I'd start writing about it. This opens up a previously unknown world, where the amount of music available seems literally limitless, and you're exposed to the kind of music you wouldn't have ordinarily chosen to listen to. By now it was at least a decade since I'd consciously chosen to listen to pop music, and I could often be heard loudly moaning about alumni of The X Factor and their ilk.

But then something changed. Not overnight, but there was a definite shift in my listening preferences. Maybe the sheer volume of music I was listening to meant it was difficult to latch onto individual tracks and artists, meaning I craved something more immediate and obvious. Maybe my advancing years meant I was finally happy to banish all notions of indie cool and “real” music. Maybe the standard of chart music just got better. Whatever the reason, I was slowly but surely drawn back into the world of pop – whether it's reality show graduates or people who couldn't write their own material or play an instrument if their life depended on it, the

only thing that mattered was gut instinct and how the song made me feel.

This isn't to say that there's no quality control filter. I can still like esoteric or challenging music, and I don't automatically think that everything in the charts is fantastic – far from it, in fact. But I've found that if you don't get hung up on hype and trends, there's some brilliant music out there that's right in front of your face. Particular songwriting or production teams don't crop up regularly without good reason.

So when some publications are fawning over the latest utterance from Arcade Fire or losing themselves over the possibility of new Bonnie “Prince” Billy material, I just can't be bothered with it all. Albums by Katy B, Lady Gaga, Nicola Roberts and Robyn have all turned my world upside down in recent times, and years ago I'd have instantly written them off before even listening to them just because of my preconceptions about the artist in question.

This isn't to say my music taste is right and yours is wrong – far from it. It's just a call to encourage people to descend from their high horse of snobbery and look beyond sales figures, media campaigns, YouTube views and whether the artist in question chooses to promote their material by gyrating in underwear rather than giving interviews about the songwriting process and – yawn – the long and difficult gestation of their new album. Pop is instantaneous and ephemeral, and it's all the better for it.